



Greg Sarris & the Native American Literature
Seville, December 2002

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1.Greg Sarris

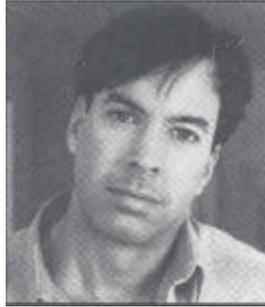
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1. Greg Sarris

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PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born February 12, 1952, in Santa Rosa, CA; son of Emilio Arthur Hilario and Mary Bernadette Hartman; adoptive son of Mary and George Sarris. Education: University of California, Los Angeles, B.A., 1978; Stanford University, M.A., 1981, 1988, Ph.D., 1989. Memberships: First Americans in the Arts, Screenwriters Guild, PEN. Addresses: Home: 2062 North Sycamore Ave., Los Angeles, CA, 90068. Office: Department of English, University of California, 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, CA, 90024.

CAREER

Author, educator, and politician. University of California, Los Angeles, professor of English, 1989--; Word for Word Theatre Company, chairman, 1995--. Chief of Federated Coast Miwok Tribe, Santa Rosa, CA, 1993-94, 1994-95. Has worked as a consultant for the Turner Broadcasting System on California Indians, and as a co-executive producer of the Home Box Office miniseries adaptation of his *Grand Avenue*, 1996.

"Sidelights"

The life of Native American author and educator Greg Sarris can be seen as symbolic of the plight of his people, the California Indians. In fact, Sarris, who has both Miwok and Pomo blood, has become one of the most recognizable figures in the California Native American's fight to not only reclaim lost land and obtain federal recognition, but also to forge a voice in which they can tell their own story. Rising from a childhood that was spent roaming from household to household, running with gangs, and held back by poverty, Sarris has overcome challenges to become a noted scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as an award-winning author. In addition,

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Sarris's political activities include having been elected as chairman, or chief, of the Federated Coast Miwok Tribes, an office he held for three straight terms. This group of tribes, which includes about three thousand California Indians of Miwok ancestry, has been active in trying to force the federal government to accept their claim that they are a legitimate, historical nation. Just as Sarris had to overcome many obstacles in his life, the Miwok and other California tribes have endured years of problems. Since Europeans became the dominant force in California, the displaced tribes have been wrecked by depression, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, hopelessness, and a major identity crisis. However, in recent years, led by the example of Sarris and other educated individuals who have risen from their ranks, they too are beginning to overcome. With improved organizational skills, these tribes are starting to empower themselves. As Sarris is apt to point out, both in the classroom and in his books, it is staggering to contemplate how the California tribes have been decimated. Most anthropologists and historians agree that in pre-European contact North America, the area that is now the state of California was the most heavily populated land north of the Rio Grande River. From the southern deserts to the northern forests, tribes such as the Yokuts, Wappo, Yuki, and Konkow thrived. However, the coming of the white man proved deadly. Since contact, the Native American population in California has plummeted by over ninety-five percent, and in the process, many cultural traits, including language and customs, were almost completely lost as well.

In his first two written works, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (1993) and *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* (1994), Sarris sheds light on this plight, noting that their struggle has largely remained out of the American public's consciousness. In addition to the undertakings of nonfiction, Sarris has produced several noted fictional works. In 1994, he was the editor of, as well as a contributor to, *The Sound of Rattles and Clappers: A Collection of New California Indian Writing*, an anthology of poetry and prose written by ten Native American writers from California. That same year, Sarris also completed what is probably his most recognized work, *Grand Avenue*, a collection of interrelated short stories about reservation life in the northern California city of Santa Rosa. The book was so popular that Home Box Office (HBO) adapted the stories into a miniseries by the same name, which ended up being the network's highest-rated show of the 1996 season.

Sarris's involvement in the project was substantial, as he both adapted the work himself and acted as the co-executive producer. The screenplay earned him several awards, including one from the American Indian Film Festival in 1996. In 1998 Sarris completed and published his first novel, *Watermelon Nights*, which was very reminiscent of *Grand Avenue* in that it takes place in Santa Rosa and deals with many of the issues that have plagued the Native Americans of California.

Like most other California Indians, Sarris's blood is an amalgamation of different ethnicities. Today, there are few remaining full-blooded Native Americans left in California. Born in Santa Rosa in 1952, Sarris would never know his real parents. While his mother, the Jewish/Irish Bunny Hartman, died during childbirth, Sarris's biological

father, the Miwok/Pomo/Filipino Emilio Hilario, walked away and began a life of heavy drinking that eventually killed him. A white couple, Mary and George Sarris, adopted the boy shortly after his birth. However, as Greg grew older, the situation with his adoptive family became less than ideal. According to Sarris, his new father was also a heavy drinker and was often abusive to him and his mother. As a result, Sarris left the family and began a life of wandering, living wherever he could find shelter.

Sarris lived with several Santa Rosa families, as well as on a horse ranch and a dairy farm. By the time he was in junior high school, he was running with gangs composed of Hispanic and Indian thugs whose main pastime was seeking out white children to fight. "It was a way of saying, 'I'm here and I'm somebody,'" Sarris recalled to Alison Schneider in an interview for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. However, Sarris's life turned around at age twelve when he met the extraordinary Mabel McKay, a Pomo elder, who gave the young man some guidance and a sense of purpose. A basket maker, McKay also taught him the importance of Indian customs and traditions that would instill in Sarris a sense of Indian pride that he had never before felt. Largely instrumental in Sarris's interest in becoming a writer, McKay, who was the last surviving member of her tribe (the Cache Creek Pomo), would be the main focus of his first two books.

Sarris attended UCLA, where he played football and received his B.A. in 1978. After a stint working as a model and an actor in Hollywood, Sarris enrolled at Stanford University, earning his M.A., and Ph.D. in modern thought and literature. In 1989 Sarris began teaching at UCLA. Not long after, he also began concentrating on his writing, which for him was a healing process as well. "Many of us have inherited a very dark history. We need to light that darkness. We need to light the room we find ourselves in with stories. The only medicine we have is words," Sarris told Schneider.

With *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, Sarris addresses the issue of Indian autobiography, as well as others topics. The book is composed of eight essays, some of which had already been published. Inspired by the stories of McKay, Sarris mixes storytelling, ethnography, autobiography, and literary criticism in examining his chosen areas of concern. One of his main points is that of the more than six hundred Indian "autobiographies" published, over eighty percent have been written by whites who have conducted interviews with the subjects, rather than by the Indians themselves. In Sarris's opinion, when a non-Indian relates these stories, the recital becomes clouded by a non-Indian worldview, and are thus tarnished. In the prologue, which is entitled "Peeling Potatoes," Sarris writes of his experience sitting with several Pomo women, including McKay, as they peel potatoes and relate their stories to him. In other essays, Sarris's addresses the term "Indianness" and also that Native American art should not be seen as artifact, but as art.

Critical response to the book was quite positive. "This text is as close to a hands-on discussion on Native American narratives as can be achieved," wrote *Choice* reviewer R. Welburn. A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* called it "interesting," and explained that it could "best be seen as a study in the encounter and clash between cultures." *American Quarterly* critic Kenneth M. Roemer was impressed with Sarris's narrative powers.

"Sarris can construct engaging dialogue and narrative action as he weaves in and out of academic and personal discourses," Roemer wrote.

The Sound of Rattles and Clappers contains mostly poetry, but also some fiction and essays. Sarris contributed two short stories, "Slaughterhouse" and "Strawberry Festival," as well as the introduction. "From this place called California, then, you have the voices of many California Indians. They are singing, telling stories, their voices echoing on the pages so you will know. Listen. This place, these rolling, oak-dotted hills, redwood forests, deserts and ocean shores are sounding," Sarris writes in the introduction. The book also contains Janice Gould's "We Exist" and Wendy Rose's "For the Scholar Who Wrote about the 'American Indian Literary Renaissance.'" A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* felt some of the poetry in *The Sound of Rattles and Clappers* was "complex, lyrical and political." A reviewer for *Native California* called the book "beautiful, lively, and fresh, rich and generous in literary style and scope."

Grand Avenue encompasses ten short stories, each of which is related in that they all revolve around one clan of Pomo. Most of the stories, including "Slaughterhouse," "Joy Ride" and "How I Got to Be Queen," deal in some way with tribal divisions, often based on ethnic differences. The stories cover three generations of the clan. While the younger individuals get caught up in petty disagreements, the elders try to instill tribal traditions, such as healing songs and basketry, in an attempt to bring everyone together. In the end, each story is about cultural survival. Typically, the stories are told in first-person narrative, each one with a different speaker. Critics loved Sarris's first major work of fiction. *World Literature Today* contributor Greg Sanchez felt *Grand Avenue* was "well-honed and incisively crafted." Charles Solomon, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, called the book a "bleak, moving portrait."

Although it is a novel, *Watermelon Nights* reads a lot like *Grand Avenue*. Rather than focusing on a whole clan, however, the story concentrates on the lives of one Pomo family, which consists of three generations. Accordingly, the book is divided into three sections, each with a different narrator. The first section is told by Johnny Severe, a twenty-year-old used-clothing store owner. While Johnny struggles with his own sexuality, his store suffers as he lends his services to the Pomo attempt to get federal recognition. Johnny's grandmother, Elba, narrates the second section, and his mother, Iris (Elba's daughter), is the third speaker. Being the elder, Elba tells of the family's long battle with both poverty and racial prejudice, while also conferring upon everybody the story of Rosa, a family ancestor whose raping and subsequent forced marriage to a Mexican general was the beginning of the family's ethnic breakdown.

Johnny's mother, Iris, is half white and searching for her real identity. All that binds the family together is tribal tradition, and their common familial bond. "The essence of it is that despite all else, love and kindness can get us through," Sarris said, explaining the book's premise to Robert Dahlin in *Publishers Weekly*. Critics lauded *Watermelon Nights*. "An ambitious debut novel," wrote Vanessa Bush in *Booklist*, adding that she felt it was "compelling." A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* was also impressed with Sarris's debut

novel. "This is a rich, satisfying tale of plain folks trying to survive in an unfriendly social milieu," the contributor wrote.

AWARDS

Recipient Award for best screenplay, Santa Fe Film Festival, 1996; American Indian Film Festival award, 1996; Best Reads Award, California Indian Booksellers, 1996.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, University of California (Berkeley), 1993.
- *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*, University of California, 1994.
- (Editor and contributor) *The Sound of Rattles and Clappers: A Collection of New California Indian Writing*, University of Arizona (Tucson, AZ), 1994.
- *Grand Avenue* (short stories), Hyperion (New York City), 1994.
- *Watermelon Nights: A Novel*, Hyperion, 1998.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Grand Avenue was adapted for television and aired on the HBO cable network, 1996.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 175: *Native American Writers of the United States*, Gale. 1997.

PERIODICALS

- *American Literature*, June, 1994, pp. 408-09.
- *American Quarterly*, March, 1994, pp. 81-91.
- *Booklist*, September 1, 1998, p. 68.
- *Choice*, November, 1993, p. 463.
- *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 19, 1996, pp. B4-B5.
- *Library Journal*, August, 1994, p. 96;
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, September 4, 1994, p. 2; January 14, 1996, p. 11.
- *Native California*, spring-summer, 1994.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 19, 1993, p. 247; February 28, 1994, p. 78; August 3, 1998, pp. 55, 73.
- *Western American Literature*, May, 1995, p. 125.
- *Whole Earth Review*, summer, 1995, pp. 74-75.
- *World Literature Today*, winter, 1996, pp. 219-20.*

2. Websites on Native American Literature



2. Websites on Native American Literature

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Native American Authors Project Internet Public Library

<http://www.ipl.org/div/natam/>

The Internet Public Library, a public service organization and a learning/teaching environment at the University of Michigan School of Information, maintains the *Native American Authors Project* webpage. This website provides information on Native North American authors with bibliographies of their published works, biographical information, and links to online resources including interviews, online texts and tribal websites. Currently the website primarily contains information on contemporary Native American authors, although some historical authors are represented.



Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures (ASAIL)

<http://oncampus.richmond.edu/faculty/ASAIL/>

Founded at the 1972 MLA Conference, the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures (ASAIL) currently has more than 400 members, many of whom are actively involved in the work of the organization. During the past twenty-seven years, ASAIL has sponsored discussion panels, workshops, and readings which have attracted not only American Indian scholars and writers. The website offers a Guide to Native American Studies Programs in the United States and Canada, the ASAIL Newsletter, etc.

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